

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 9th, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Where is Your Mind?
Rev. John Crow

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145
Romans 7:21-8:6
Matthew 11:25-30

How is your frame of mind? Are you in your right mind? Would it blow your mind if I gave you a piece of my mind? Might it change your mind? It might if you have an open mind. I hope your mind isn't in the gutter. It's better to have peace of mind. Or maybe you just have a mind of your own. Our reading from Romans today tells us that where our mind is makes all the difference. Paul also seems to write of a struggle between his two natures, and if we aren't careful, we could walk away confused and depressed. If the great apostle Paul struggles, how am I possibly going to make it? And what does this have to do with the Law that Paul keeps mentioning? Over the next several minutes, I want to clear up the confusion and give you a very different picture—a vision of complete peace and rest.

If one pays even nominal attention to today's passage, one word stands out: "law." In fact, this word is repeated eleven times in our eleven verses, and it is

always the same root word in Greek. Clearly, we can't ignore what Paul wants to say about the Law here. Unfortunately, as 21st century Americans, that is exactly what we are prone to do. We hear the word *law*, and our brains immediately shuffle that word off to the *Old Testament and no longer applies to me as a Christian* category. That is partly true. For those who haven't seen the text of my sermon (which is just about everyone), I'm saying *Law* with a capital *L*. I say that to mean the Ten Commandments, which are universal, over and against the Levitical law, which was specifically for the nation of Israel up until the ministry of Jesus. That law, which includes rules about sacrifices, stoning, and staying "clean," is completely obsolete now and no longer serves a function. Throughout the remainder of my sermon, I will be referring to the Ten Commandments as the *Law*.

Paul describes our two natures at war within ourselves. The Law is a sort of referee in this struggle between sin and holiness; evil and good. If we go back a few verses to chapter seven, verse seven, we read, "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law." Since God gave us the Law through Moses, it has continued to instruct mankind's behavior. Do we not rehearse the Ten

Commandments *every* Sunday here at Epworth? The Law is an important revelation of God's will for how we treat each other and act towards God.

Another way to think of the Law is like a plumb line. A plumb line can only point straight down, and is therefore a reliable measure of whether something is straight or tilted. Anything that is tilted is unstable. In the same way, the Law helps us determine where our mind is. Is it on the right or left of the plumb line? Is your mind straight or tilted?

A cursory reading of chapter seven gives one the impression that Paul's mind was all over the place! At one moment he's to the right of the plumb line, and the next he's on the left. Surely, he was spiritually unstable. I want to vehemently disagree with this view. As I said earlier, the Law is Paul's main point here, not the nature of sin. So Paul's primary point is this: Despite the Law having a divine origin, it is unable to save or sanctify. This is a stumbling block for the Jews whom Paul is addressing in Romans. As I've already laid out, Paul also defends the Law for those who never lived under it.

We are well aware that we are all born with a sinful nature. In our natural, sinful state, we sin with little thought to what we are doing. Then along comes knowledge of the Law, making us aware of the depths of our evil. The Law reveals for the first time that we are slaves to sin, and that the just penalty of sin is death. What a wretched place to be! We realize we are trapped, and cannot possibly free ourselves. As Paul puts it, “what a miserable person I am! Who will free me...?” Who has power over the Law?

Thanks be to God! While Jesus Christ didn’t bring the Law to an end, He instead perfectly fulfilled its requirements on our behalf, thus setting us free. Historically, He saved us through His death and resurrection, but His salvation is still being made complete in our lives. This is what theologians like to call *the now and the not yet*. When we see Paul’s description of our inner struggle in view of *the now and the not yet*, it becomes an eschatological issue—an issue of where we are in God’s plan in history—more so than an issue of the nature of sin. This is a big claim, and we’ll come back to this idea in a few minutes.

Now let’s follow Paul’s thought as he moves on from the Law to discuss the mind. We all know it to be true that if you plant tomato seeds, you get tomato plants. If

you plant apple seeds, you get apple trees. There is no way to plant a tomato seed and wind up with an apple tree. That's the very idea behind what Paul tells us in verse five of chapter eight. There is an immutable law that flesh begets flesh, and spirit begets spirit. So how can a being of sin and flesh make the leap to obedience and spirit? The same way we were freed from the Law! Only the saving power of Jesus Christ can do that.

If we have allowed Christ to do His work in our lives, what should be the fruit of our lives? The fruit of the Spirit, of course: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By the way, Galatians 5:22-23, where we find the fruit of the Spirit, also tells us that, "Against such things there is no law." I understand that to mean that the fruit of the Spirit, which results from having Christ in our hearts, is above the Law, and thus fulfills it. Where our mind is, so will our actions and motivations go. This too, is an immutable law.

Why, then, do we struggle so? Where do these sinful urges come from if our innermost being belongs to Christ? While acknowledging what Christ and the Holy Spirit have done for us, Paul also acknowledges that sin is powerful, and we

so often find ourselves returning to our old master. Sanctification requires us to neither attempt to achieve it on our own, nor to sit back and wait for God to do it all. Holy lives are the “necessary mark” (*The Epistle of the Romans*, Douglas J. Moo, 485) of those who are saved. This struggle reminds us that we are living in the *now and the not yet*. Again, we’ll come back to that in a minute.

In the last verse of today’s reading, Paul goes one step further, in telling his readers that the flesh leads to death, while the Spirit leads to life and peace. I already told you that if our minds are on the Spirit, then the fruit of the Spirit **will** result. That sounds good, but it also may sound like list of traits that, when we’re completely honest, feel beyond our grasp. But the fruit of the Spirit—a mind set on Christ—results in life and peace. **That** sounds great! True life is hidden in Christ. Peace between people and nations; within families and marriages; even within our innermost selves, is only possible through Christ.

Without Christ and the working of the Spirit, peace can only be temporary, and is often a false peace at that, requiring us to set aside certain issues that really should be dealt with. That is because such peace is of the flesh, which is our sinful nature. The flesh leads to death. Every time. No exceptions.

I want to make a brief footnote here, to ensure no one gets confused. When I say *the flesh*, just like the Bible does, I mean one's sinful nature—not literally our bodies. That's important, because God declared our bodies good in the Creation. Christianity is unusual in that rather than ignoring or even denigrating the human body, it glorifies it. Our bodies are more than mere shells housing our spirits. Bodies matter. Physicality matters. So don't get caught up in these common pagan ideas about one day escaping our bodies because they are morally inferior. Remember, we will have bodies in eternity.

OK, enough with the aside. Back to our regularly scheduled sermon. Now I ask you: *Where is your mind?* Is it to the right or left of the plumb line? Is it on the flesh and the things of this world, or is it on the Spirit? I've already told you where it all goes from here. If you realize you are on the wrong side, then Christ and Christ alone is your answer. No matter how hard you try, in this instance, you can't change your mind. We cannot earn our salvation. Thanks be to God!

But Pastor John, what about this whole *now and not yet thing*? I'm glad you asked. The *now* is the part of the Kingdom of God that we are experiencing right

at this moment. We are righteous before God because the blood of Christ covers us. As Paul puts it in the first verse of chapter eight, “So **now** there is no condemnation for those who belong Christ Jesus.” The Law doesn’t condemn us, nor does God. How amazing is that? Our sins are forgiven. Not only that, but we find belonging in God! I’ll talk more about that next week.

Now also includes the very real guiding and empowering of the Holy Spirit. We can experience the goodness of God, and know His will. We can enjoy a supernatural peace, joy, and hope. The Spirit also offers a way out of every temptation. While all these things and more are ours to enjoy and use for the service of our Lord right now, none of these gifts are complete. We aren’t able fully to experience God in this life, or to have unbroken peace from birth to death. This is where the *not yet* comes in. The kingdom of God is arriving like a long, slow train. The first few cars have already arrived at the station, but the caboose is still a long way off. The train is still moving. Right now, we just have a foretaste of God’s kingdom.

The *now and the not yet* plays a key role in today’s passage. Paul laments, and then accepts the enduring struggle in this time in between. He knows the train

will stop, but must continue to persevere until that time, which our reading in Zechariah describes as a time of peace between all nations. Our gospel reading today tells us that at the consummation of time, we will find rest for our souls. I don't think it is news to anyone that the rest we experience in this life is not complete. We will continue to struggle until Christ calls us home. The Law is also caught in the *now and the not yet*, as we are. God gave the Law to mankind to instruct and lead to holiness during the previous age. Now that Christ has finished His earthly ministry, and the Holy Spirit has come, the Law is fulfilled in Christ, but continues to serve its original purpose as a guide towards holiness. When viewed from the perspective of the movement of God's *kyros* time, this passage of seemingly disconnected themes of the struggle between two natures and the Law all fits together nicely.

As we prepare to receive the Holy Eucharist, let us commit to persevere in this time of the *now and the not yet*. Even though we cannot yet see the caboose, let us never lose faith in its arrival, thus marking the completion of God's plan. We will continue to endure the scars of sin, both in our personal lives, and in the lives of those around us. Creation itself will continue to groan. But the Eucharist reminds us that Christ is still with us, His plan is still unfolding, and He freely offers

His empowering and forgiving grace to those who would receive it. If you want to receive this grace today, then your mind is right where it should be.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.